

Space, Location, Migration and Memories in Meena Alexander's Manhattan Music

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Abstract

Meena Alexander's *Manhattan Music* (1997) exhibits the collective trauma, and maladies of Diaspora subjects who are entangled in multiple space, locations, migrations and memories as they are dislocated from their homeland. The two major females—Sandhya Rosenblum and Draupadi Dinkins, temporally located in New York and Manhattan Island, undergo the turmoil of space, location, migration and memories due to socio-political unrest. Alexander chronicles how the harmony in man woman relationship is tossed on the backdrop of increasing terrorism in international space. The female Diaspora subjects project nomadic identities as they migrate from place to place. These characters explore variant spaces in the international space. At the same time they visit physically and often times, virtually their homeland and cherish the memories of the past. The present paper attempts to examine space, multiple locations, migration and memories of female subjects in this narrative. The female figures in the novel face trauma of dislocation and multiple migrations.

KEYWORDS: space, location, migration, memories, trauma.

Meena Alexander's *Manhattan Music* (1997) epitomizes the collective trauma, and maladies of focal female subjects—Sandhya Rosenblum and Draupadi Dinkins located in New York and Manhattan Island in the turmoil of socio-political unrest. The narrative presents a collage of traumatic experiences of diasporic characters as they are caught in international space and unaccustomed locations due to multiple migrations. Alexander showcases loss of harmony in the lives of dislocated females who experience nomadic identities. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni compliments the novel, articulating the psychological trauma of the characters caught in international space, "At once violent and erotic, and somber, *Manhattan Music* is infused with the power of myth and poetry and the inner life, the electric intersection of characters who illuminate for the reader both the Old World and the New." (Web)

Sandhya Rosenblum, the female protagonist of *Manhattan Music*, is a Syrian Christian Indian by birth who has married to a Jewish New Yorker, Stephen as the author. The novel opens with Sandhya staying with her husband, Stephen and a small daughter, Dora in Manhattan Island. *Manhattan Music* exhibits the lived experiences of dark women in international space. Sandhya is born and brought up in Tiruvella, a rural site from south India. Gautam, her college day's lover was taken into police custody by the police mistakenly as a rioter and was tortured to death. As time passes, she rehabilitates by acclimatizing to live without him. Gradually, in the course of time, she marries Stephen,

who is much fascinated by her. The novel chronicles Sandhya's trauma to journey from the memories of the past and accept the uneasy present and further ponder upon the uncertain future in transnational space. The fractions of her identities are connected to every place she visited and stayed. As a result, for Sandhya the locations do not merely stand as geographical spaces but as the locations of her memories. As a migrant she represents mobility and subsequently, fractured identities with every location. Pin-chia Feng in the article, "Immigration Rhapsody: Memories of Geographies in Meena Alexander's *Manhattan Music*" rightly articulates the theme of the novel:

What distinguishes the novel from most of immigrant literature is the way in which Alexander insists on spatializing the consciousness of her protagonist by providing specific geographical locations to her memory, what I would like to call composing "memory of geographies." Through representing the "memory of geographies" that attests to Sandhya's simultaneous rootedness and rootedness in multiple places, Alexander juxtaposes the temporal with the spatial and the local with the global in the discursive construction of Sandhya's identity. (Pin-chai Feng: Web)

Manhattan Music introduces Sandhya in the initial pages with a part of the narrative captioned; "Sitting" which highlights that Sandhya is sitting in the Central Park with 'a staying put' position wherein she experiences her cultural drift as she is feeling lonely. Alexander introduces her in a park and not in a home which also indicates that Sandhya is without the warmth of a home and she is in a public place with a pool of memories of her home and of the past. She remembers her first visit to America with her husband Stephen after her marriage when the immigration officer welcomes the couple, "Welcome to America. Be happy here." (Alexander: 1997: 7) indicates shift in space. In *Manhattan Island* Sandhya Rosenblum learns to adjust in the new found land which according to her mother-in-law, Muriel is 'the land of opportunities.'

As a migratory subject who always longs for the homeland, Sandhya misses her native and in her imagination and dreams she reaches her native. She relishes her favourite places, persons and incidents from her past that provide her escape from the foreignness of the host nation. The memories of her former lover, Gautam haunt her and make her restless, turning her nights sleepless which shows that though Sandhya is physically away from her home and homeland, but she is haunted by the memories of the past. Alexander narrates:

Her dreams gave her little respite. They took her to another country. Always it was the same place, the exact same time. That fragile flash of light before the sun rose, the sky still peach, stained with gray. She was a young woman, in her twenties, sitting next to Gautam by the river bank. (Alexander: 1997: 9)

Meena Alexander narrates Sandhya's position as a dislocated Diaspora person, "Stephen had married her and brought her to America. She would live here, she would learn to forget." (Alexander: 1997: 11) This notion of dislocation gets further more poignant when she finds her nomadic identity in a neon sign when she is in the Hudson. The neon sign sojourns her to her homeland, where she still cherishes her childhood memories of

rural and natural setting, free from impurities. Alexander explicates the flight of imagination of her protagonist who is dislocated in the host nation:

She jumped the initials on the neon sign together—NAMAD. A vowel shift and it could make sense, NOMAD, a creature of restless passage. She thought of herons in the paddy fields of Kerala, wings outstretched, circling water, marking out the emptiness of the sky. (Alexander: 1997: 11)

Sandhya has been staying in the United States for more than three years and she has been acclimatizing herself with the culture of the host nation. But, the impact of Indian culture and ethnicity are evident in her routine life style in the alien land. She does not get assimilated in the cultural tenets and commonalities of the host nation. “Even after three years in America she felt naked somehow if her legs showed. In public she always wore a longish skirt or some manner of trouser.” (Alexander: 1997: 13)

Migration to America does not provide happiness to Sandhya. She wishes to connect to Jay or Chandu, her cousins who are placed thousands of kilometers away from her. She desires to cross the physical distance with the help of telephone and talk to them. Here, she expects to explode the spatial fixities. Alexander narrates:

The transparency she assumed in the world, so that thousands of miles subsided into the flare of a moment—he is so far away, but I can call him and if the connection works, I can hear his voice, he’ll know I’m speaking to him—reverted into a mockery of space, a black hole of longing. (Alexander: 1997: 14)

Alexander showcases how the memories play a vital role in the lives of the dislocated subjects. Even the torturous memories of the past become a comfort zone for Sandhya in the host country. She remembers the days of social turmoil in India when Mrs. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India was assassinated in Delhi. This political act turns into political trauma as well as social unrest which results into riots, taking away the basic human rights of the citizens in India. These riots in Hyderabad took lives of many innocent people like Gautam. As a lonely person in the alien land Sandhya remains tangled into the memories of her past.

Further, Sandhya also remembers how she had experienced dislocation after coming to New York. With her husband, Stephen she visits a number of sites known for scenic beauties in New York which generally a migrant subject does. The signboards in the host nation indicate that they have been displayed to guide the foreigners. These signboards invoke the sense of dislocation more poignant in Sandhya. The brave new world always reminds her of her uprootedness. Sandhya observes:

...all arranged as if the passerby might enter through the immaculate show into a past so cleft from its indices of dirt and disaster that the magnitude of dislocations the immigrants had suffered might be cast afresh in a time without before or behind, well-lit and clearly palpable. (Alexander: 1997: 36)

Alexander also touches upon the issue of global migration of people from different nationalities to America. Sandhya’s migration from India and also the migration of other

immigrants to America is symbolically projected by the writer, as the travellers in a single boat huddled together to enter the host nation. Here, the boat symbolizes a space of betweenness where the travellers are neither in their homeland nor in the host country. All of them are dislocated and they also are not aware about where they will land. Pin-chai Feng rightly be evoked to trace the multiple spaces and locations. The narrator articulates:

How reluctant Sandhya had been to enter the boat crammed with tourists from the four corners of the globe: Japanese, Nigerians, Australians, Danes, even tourists from the United Provinces, which was what Stephen privately called the broken-up Soviet Republic, substituting for its new name that of the state in the Indian subcontinent he knew best. (Alexander: 1997: 36)

Manhattan Music introduces Draupadi Dinkins, another nomadic female character who exhibits fractured identity as she is of Indian, African, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino and European descent. Her descent exhibits her nomadism which invokes identity crisis in her. Draupadi is an American by birth but her parents were bonded labourers from India who were taken away by the colonizers in the new found land for working on plantations and factories. Draupadi's interest in performance art indicates that she desires to rehabilitate in America as an artist where she can articulate her trauma, sufferings through an array of subjects and their emotions in the third world. Draupadi Dinkins' trauma, though seems personal apparently, it is both familial as well as universal. Draupadi represents an example of the migrants whose ancestors were forcibly dislocated from their homeland to work as bonded labourers. In doing so, they lost their homeland, culture, ethnicity, language and the comfort zone of their geographical borders. Thus, migration results into multitude of journeys and chaos in identity. Draupadi pre-empt:

My ancestors were scattered from British sailing ships, dark bits of ground pepper flung onto plantations in Trinidad, Fiji. Bonded labourers from India scratching the dirt of the New World. Men used hard, and women, too, cane leaves cutting into their wrists. Papa and Mama migrated to America, settled in Gingee by the Hudson where Mama gave birth to me. (Alexander: 1997: 4)

Draupadi's immigrant identity descends to slavery which further moves on to many countries becoming a temporal resident of a number of nations. While exploring her roots of culture and identity; and the routes of multiple migrations that her earlier generations undertook, she experiences trauma. Her voice grows gruff. Draupadi, therefore, explicates him the routes and roots of her culture, identity and ethnicity. She states:

"I was born in Gingee, most part Indian, part African descended from slaves, pride of Kala Pani, sister to the Middle Passage. Also part Asian-American, from Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino blood: railroads in the West, the pineapple and sugarcane fields." I straightened up, my voice growing hoarse.

"I also have a smattering of white—low European—in me. Hence the slight pallor, I suspect." (Alexander: 1997: 47)

Meena Alexander establishes a bridge between the mythical characters of Draupadi from the Indian epic, The Mahabharata with that of Draupadi Dinkins. The only bond between them is that they both belong to the ancestral homeland, India and both of them discover their femininities in multiple male partners. Exploration of their femininities in the company of variant male partners epitomizes the psychological trauma of women of Indian origin who believe in the sacrosanct ritual of marriage and loyalty with the single partner whom the woman has married. Both Draupadis are intelligent human beings who struggle to create their own space in this parochial society. For her The Mahabharata is her favourite epic only because it has Draupadi as the central female figure in it.

Further, Draupadi Dinkins is equally attached to another dislocated female in the narrative, Lady Day. Lady Day is an American singer who combats in the parochial domain of singing to form her identity as a singer. The song of Lady Day transfers her into imagining a new space—the third world space. The spirit of Columbus and the songs of Lady Day, therefore, become the key factors to push her ahead on the path of courage and high morale. These ideals are dislocated persons who struggle with the oddities and finally prove to be successful. Similarly, Draupadi too desires to succeed with her multiple identities in the new world—America, the third world. Alexander chronicles, “And this, Draupadi told Jay, with more than a little bravado, she took to be her truest bond with American culture. Indeed Lady Day’s songs made Draupadi dream of a new world.” (Alexander: 1997: 53)

Alexander makes Manhattan Music more vivid, complex, multicultural and interesting by introducing one more dislocated character, Rashid el Obeid, an Egyptian scholar who is pursuing his post-doc research at Columbia. The relationship between Rashid and Draupadi goes for a toss as Rashid is busy in his terroristic activities secretly. This also indicates that migration and nomadism nurtures temporality in man-woman relationship. Consequently, Draupadi experiences loss and alienation in the host country. Alexander examines the forming and parting of water waves and the migratory water birds that symbolize the dislocated status of Draupadi:

What hurt though was the sudden emptiness in her arms, nothing to hold onto. Even work was hard. She would stand then and gaze out of the window at river water in waves, sullen indigo tips forming and parting, pale waterbirds wheeling over. Surely they had come from somewhere far away, perhaps Mount Fuji. (Alexander: 1997: 54)

Voluntary dislocation and search for identity are some of the major canons of Draupadi Dinkins’ character. She embraces mobility and nomadism by discarding to stay with her parents. Like any third world young American she also wants to establish her ‘self’ by staying in cheap hotels temporally like a nomadic subject. The dislocated, exile and homeless identity of Draupadi is exhibited in the narrative. Alexander captures her homelessness:

“A house dismantled,” she murmured. “I lived there once.”

It was an old residential hotel for the poor. They were pulling it down as part of a neighbourhood gentrification scheme. The threshold was a gash, the main door destroyed, the eastern wall jagged, the dust of a thousand broken bricks pouring out. Sandhya saw windows with ledges blown off, a splintered floor suspended in air. For all that she knew, it could have been a war zone.

“You lived there once?”

“Three days, when I had nowhere else to go.” (Alexander: 1997: 57)

Eventually, Draupadi Dinkins in the chapter titled, “Another India” tries to trace the dislocated Indian migrants who are dislocated not physically but they are dislocated from within. The caption itself articulates the Diaspora community in America longing for India and trying to make another India in America. Draupadi says:

“I know she wanted to make a home in America, but it seemed so hard at time.”

“Home is where the heart is,” Rinaldo whispered to me. It sounded like a quote from the letter Columbus wrote in 1502 to the Banco di san Giorgo, after his terrible third voyage:

“Though my body is here, my heart is constantly there.”

(Alexander: 1997: 86)

Draupadi, in this novel, exhibits multiculturalism, transnationalism and unclear identity. She attempts to trace the roots and routes of her identity. She states:

Born to the only daughter of Suhasini of Trinidad and Tobago, not knowing which bit of blood came from what island side. Great-grandmother, Indian by way of Fiji, sent over to work on plantations. Father, Indian with Japanese blood in him and a dash of white. His mother, part-black from Kentucky, with a streak of a native nation. Grandpa changed his name from Dineshwaran to Dinkins, thinking it sounded easier on the ears. (Alexander: 1997: 87-88)

Here, Alexander is tracing the trauma of the young generation who gather in pub to distress themselves. The land of promises, thus, becomes the land of compromises as the young Indians are without family and home. They shrug off their trauma displacement by consuming sedatives. The social and cultural gatherings in their homeland are not evident in the host nation. They have nobody share their emotions and ideas; as a result, they go to pub where they can see a huge crowd of Indians, where they can at least ‘feel at home’. The casual relationship between Draupadi and Rinaldo reaches the trauma between man-woman relationships. This domestic trauma results into the abortion of foetus which Draupadi does unwillingly because Rinaldo is already a married person who cannot accept her as his wife. They are unable to give the child a home. Draupadi undergoes this trauma very seriously.

In the part entitled, “Staying” the narrator showcases the issues of acculturation and assimilation of the dislocated people with the host nation and its culture. This is a sort of rehabilitation after facing a series of traumas in the alien land. The narrator states:

Immigrants always had their problems. Travelling places was hard, staying was harder. You had to open your suitcase, lay out the little bits and pieces into ready-made niches. Smooth out the sari, exchange it for a skirt, have your hair trimmed a little differently...then you tucked the suitcase under the bed and forgot about it, started accumulating the bric-a-brac that made part of the streets around. If you were lucky, you had a garden, with a picket fence, a plot of earth you could plant, a patch of mint. (Alexander: 1997: 207)

The narrative closes with Sandhya returning to home to stay with her husband, Stephen and Dora and settles happily with her newly found ‘self’ in Manhattan Island. Draupadi Dinkins after undergoing the trauma of loss of her love and the foetus finds her space in performance art in which she performs an array of femininities which she has

experienced herself in her real life. Eventually, the females in the narrative change the map and they draw their own almanac and routes of journey towards their uncertain future in the transnational domain. Thus one can trace the remark by Rabindranath Maharaj in his article, “Frankenstein in America” who states, “Meena Alexander’s *Manhattan Music* examines the consequences of migration, the disruption of certitudes and the intrusion of memory in the attempt to create a new, unblemished identity.” (Maharaj: 1998: 90)

Manhattan Music concludes with Draupadi busily performing her visual art in the celebrations of Diwali festival, creating another niche India in Manhattan Island. Diwali festival symbolizes happiness, light, joy and sweetness in human life and relationships. The Dismantled and out of tune music of the dislocated and fragmented Diaspora subjects conclude in happy Manhattan music. The migrants adapt and assimilate with the American life but they feel stretched thin, as if they should be in two places at once. *Manhattan Music* is book that frequently changes the focus, place, time, voice and style which reinforce the themes of space, location, migration and memories.

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